Our first glimpse of the screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) in *Adaptation* (dir. Spike Jonze, 2002) captures our subject unawares. Through the lens of an unseen video camera, Charlie peers nervously from the sidelines on the set of *Being John Malkovich* (dir. Spike Jonze, 1999), the real Kaufman's first filmed Hollywood script. His obvious unease at the peripheries of this set sits oddly with his designation as the primary character of the film we are watching, a role established by his anxious voiceover monologue just seconds before. He has been formally identified as ‘Charlie Kaufman, Screenwriter’ across the bottom of the screen and the camera’s interest in him as a subject is evident. But despite these privileging gestures in the narrative set-up, the first assistant director’s sharply dismissive; ‘You. You’re in the eye-line. Can you please get off the stage?’1 is sufficient to confirm Charlie’s sense of his own interloper status. In the face of such confident demonstrations of on-set authority, Charlie, the production’s writer, is scared from the set. As the scene demonstrates, Cage’s Charlie already has sweat-inducing issues with his function as screenwriter, author and, more acutely yet, as a human being. As a fictional version of the ‘real’ Charlie Kaufman in a semi-fictional cinematic space created by Kaufman,2 the character Charlie is constantly overwritten by the real Kaufman’s anxieties about authorship, screenwriting and artistic sincerity. Yet, importantly, Charlie’s search for a meaningful adaptation of another person’s work suggests that in a twenty-first-century world simultaneously fascinated by true feeling and cracked apart by its deteriorating belief in ‘reality’,3 *Adaptation’s* bold, post-modern wrapping can scarcely conceal an emphatically modernist search for an honest, and singular, truth.

The filmmaker’s quest for truth does not, however, wed him to local acts of truth telling. On the contrary: it is difficult to imagine a film more committed to deceiving its audience than *Adaptation*. Indeed, as Kaufman populates his storyline with a parade of different authors – novelists, journalists, scientists, screenwriters – it becomes more difficult to discern which of Kaufman’s authorial proxies (Charlie and his twin brother Donald only...
the most obvious of the available candidates) comes nearest to its creator. My analysis will investigate two related threads running through *Adaptation*: first, Kaufman’s anxious negotiation between the profession of screenwriting and the status of author; and second, his use of duplication and duplicity in exploring himself and his authorial identity on-screen. Further, I shall argue that throughout this film Kaufman uses acts of duplicity to distil the true from the inauthentic – in other words, harnessing the power of lies to find the truth in human nature.

Hollywood has long been interested in the conflicted figure of the screenwriter. Traditional iterations of the hardworking yet underpaid movie scribe appear memorably in films such as *Sunset Boulevard* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1950), narrated by a dead screenwriter; *Barton Fink* (dir. Coen Brothers, 1991), featuring a screenwriter struggling with writer’s block; and *State and Main* (dir. David Mamet, 2000), which follows a first-time screenwriter just entering Hollywood. Significantly, all three characters share an inherent anxiety about the opportunity to be personally recognized for their work in an essentially collaborative industry. Similarly, in *Adaptation*, Charlie is struck by the dangers inherent in being a writer in Hollywood. When commissioned to adapt the non-fiction work *The Orchid Thief*, he decries formulaic screenwriting, telling studio executive Valerie (Tilda Swinton) that he doesn’t want to have to compromise ‘by making it a Hollywood thing, you know, like making it an orchid heist movie or turning the orchids into poppies and making it about drug-running, you know?’4 Kaufman’s (and Charlie’s) fear of the formulaic seems validated when, later in the movie, Valerie attempts to allay Susan Orlean’s (Meryl Streep) anxieties about adapting her own work for the screen with the over-quick reply, ‘Oh, don’t worry ... We have screenwriters to write the screenplay’.5 In referring to them in the plural, Valerie alludes to a stable of apparently interchangeable jobbing writers. This marks ‘them’ as other – hired hands working to someone else’s vision and therefore clearly institutionally distinguished in the hierarchies from an author of Susan’s standing. In the event, the type of ‘hack’ alluded to in both Charlie’s fears and Valerie’s chirpy reassurances finds direct expression in the film in the character of Charlie’s twin brother Donald. Donald worships screenwriting guru Robert McKee’s ‘principles’ of screenwriting and, by directly implementing those, writes an unapologetically formulaic thriller called *The 3*. The fact that he later sells this cynical work of writing-by-numbers for a six-figure sum vindicates both Valerie’s cheeriness and Charlie’s sense of dread, illustrating as it does the commercial efficacy of ‘the system’ and the industry’s habitual privileging of the generically tested and market-affirmed.

The screenwriter’s status as a contracted worker rather than as an author remains, at least in part, a symptom of uneven copyright law across different forms of published fiction in the United States. Unlike novels, books and plays, a screenplay legally belongs to the commissioning employer,